

Communicating Change in Chaotic Times: Toward a Maatian Understanding of Civility

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Abstract: As a field, and especially for those of us who are religious communication scholars, we have addressed notions of civility. We have used civility to understand our research, pedagogical practices, and dialogue construction. When addressing the uncivil acts on social media and in our political discussions, many scholars have cited the scholarship in “civil communication” as a starting place for inquiry. Many institutions have turned to creating entire programs in “civil communication” or “civil dialogue.” However, much of this grounds itself in a Western understanding of communication and rhetoric. For instance, our understanding of ethics, morality, good judgment, civility, and the like spring from our readings of Aristotle, Plato, and others in the classical Western tradition of our field. Only recently has there been an effort to draw from non-Western, non-European writings and scholarship. I argue that the ethical dilemma for our time is as follows: How do we communicate with people who are not telling the truth? How do we form community with people who are living and perpetuating a lie? What do civility, morality, and justice look like amid incivility, immorality, and injustice? How are harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order maintained amid disharmony, imbalance, and disorder? In this presentation, I suggest that an understanding of the Africana communication paradigm grounded in Maat would be helpful when addressing and discussing conceptions of civil communication. Using the January 6, 2021, insurrection and the continued fallout from the riot at the United States Capitol as a case study, I call for a civility grounded in an ethical and moral presentation and articulation of a Maatian understanding of truth.

Keywords: civility, Maat, communication ethics, Africana communication, insurrection

Introduction¹

On May 28, 2021, Republican senators effectively stopped Congress from forming a bipartisan commission to investigate the failures of the January 6, 2021,

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insurrection attempt by supporters of then-President Trump. Broadcast live throughout traditional and social media outlets, the insurrectionists stormed the United States Capitol with the intention of violently attacking members of Congress and overthrowing the recent presidential election. Made up of Trump supporters and conspiracy theorists linked to QAnon and the Proud Boys, and encouraged by the rhetoric of Donald Trump, the mob laid waste to the Capitol.

Members of Congress “hid under desks, stripped their identification pins from their lapels to avoid being attacked and escaped into secret passageways,” while rioters “ransacked the office of the House speaker.” This mob of so-called patriots also “smashed windows and assaulted police inside the nation’s iconic symbol of democracy.” *The Washington Post* reported it this way:

By the hundreds, they climbed the grand marble staircase and breached police gates and smashed windows and shoved police officers and broke through doorways and forced their way in. They burst into the offices and chambers of the Capitol, taking over the place as though it were their own, lounging in members’ offices, strolling through the statuaries, halting the constitutional process of completing Joe Biden’s election to the presidency and raising the specter of a coup against this 232-year-old democracy. (Fisher et al. 2021)

After the carnage of that day, more than 140 people were injured, and five people died. There will be much to talk about regarding the insurrection, and, undoubtably, scholars from all disciplines will weigh in, for instance, on how the police treated the rioters, the role of President Trump and his supporters, and how race functioned in all of this. However, today, I want to focus on the rhetoric that many of us heard after the attempted coup. Calls to “move on,” that “it’s over now,” or that “we need to get to the business of governing” echoed from the Capitol. Just a couple of weeks after the failed coup, the United States senator from Texas, Ted Cruz, went on Fox News and declared that it was “time to move on” (Mazza 2021).

After denouncing Trump and his rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the insurrection, Nikki Haley, former South Carolina governor and rumored presidential candidate, had a change of heart. Noting that the majority of the GOP still sided with Trump, she quickly pivoted and offered support for the former president. In speaking about the second impeachment trial of Trump, she said, “They beat him up before he got into office and they’re beating him up after he leaves office. I mean at some point, give the man a break. I mean, move on if you truly are about moving on” (Oh 2021).

Senator Lindsey Graham echoed Haley’s sentiments. In his disapproval of a second impeachment trial of the former president, Graham opined, “It is past time for all of us to try to heal our country and move forward.” Also addressing concerns about a second impeachment trial, Rep. Ted Budd chided Democrats’ attempts at accountability by framing his concern around unity: “If Democrats say they want unity, this isn’t the way to show it” (McGrane 2021).

However, one of the strongest appeals for moving on came from the left-leaning Glenn Greenwald. Speaking about Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s response and refusal of the outward gesture from Ted Cruz to work together on

Wall Street reforms, Greenwald condemned her actions. In an interview on *The Jimmy Dore Show* on YouTube, “Greenwald argued that by taking so strong a stance against Republicans, Ocasio-Cortez ruined an opportunity to forge a bipartisan opposition to Wall Street based on the current conflict between small investors organized on Reddit and large hedge funds” (Heer 2021).

“Ted Cruz,” he continued,

whatever you think of him, reached out by saying, “I agree with AOC about this.” So that was an opportunity for right and left to join together to do something that is supposedly her main reason for existing as a political figure, which is fighting income inequality, and instead she turns around and says, “F— you, I don’t want to work with you. You guys got me murdered. You’re a white supremacist.” And suddenly the two camps divide again and over here you have the red team and over here you have the blue team cheering like morons at a f—ing high school football game again because she ruined that movement. Because all she wants to do is attack Republicans and fortify the Democratic Party. (Heer 2021)

Greenwald continued, saying,

I do believe AOC was genuinely rattled by what happened at the Capitol. But she made it through completely unscathed. Not even a tiny little bruise on her body. Every other member of Congress in the Democratic caucus, including Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib and others are equally demonized, and they are f—ing over it. They got over it. If you want to be a member of Congress, you can’t constantly center your own lived experiences, you’re not there to center yourself in every drama. (Heer 2021)

Civility

The whole idea of moving on before you address the issues and problems that would help you to move on has always baffled me. But maybe this need to move on, or in Greenwald’s comments, to work with someone who you believe supported the insurrection that could have led to injury or, even worse, death, is grounded in our notions of civility. The term “civility” has found a home in our study of communication, especially in religious communication. Kristiana Báez and Ersula Ore write,

“Civil” dialogue is valued most amid instances of difference and disagreement because it expresses that despite difference and differences, diverse perspectives—the voices of “others”—are valued. In this way, civility is conceived as a democratic good, a proper civic posture, and an ethical practice of egalitarianism. The rhetorical construction of civility as a “democratic good” is based on the presumption that the expectation to be “civil” will be imposed and regulated in an objective, neutral, and fair way. This, however, is the ideal of civility. As we know, there is always tension between the ideal of a thing and the actuality of its practice. (2018, 331)

Thus, the ideal has ruled the day. We have used civility to understand our research, pedagogical practices, and dialogue construction. When addressing uncivil acts on social media and in our political discussions, many scholars have cited the scholarship in civil communication as a starting place for inquiry. Many institutions have turned to creating entire programs in civil communication or civil dialogue (Hawn 2020, 225–26).

However, as recent scholarship attests, some scholars take issue with the term. For instance, Allison Hawn, drawing from the work of Roland Barthes, calls civility a “myth.” She writes,

This use of civility as a basis for what constitutes “good communication” has permeated the Communication field, further reinforcing the modern dichotomous version of the myth adopted in academia. The myth propelled by programs . . . further promotes the idea that a lack of civility leads to discord, and for any successful communication to take place between disagreeing sides, that a level of decorum needs to be established, maintained, and utilized. (Hawn 2020, 226)

She continues by arguing that “civility,” no matter how “well intentioned or how much one wishes to reclaim the term for the better, is a word so entrenched in the myth of insiders and outsiders, whose voice counts and whose does not, whose behaviors are proper and whose are deemed barbaric, that it is inextricably linked at this juncture to its oppressive roots” (Hawn 2020, 226).

While Hawn’s critiques of civility have merit, she admittedly does not offer a replacement. As a matter of fact, many critiques of civility leave the reader to wonder: What else can we do? If we are not civil in our discussions and dialogues, how can change take place? As such, many scholars call on us to come up with new models and methods that can help us achieve communication goals while maintaining our dignity and humanity. For instance, Hawn argues that the place to start is to stop “putting our time, our funding, and our mental energy into shoring up a practice that in name and praxis is problematic at its core. . . . As a community of thinkers, let us move in new directions, let us think uncivilly, let us think boldly, and let us not pause to worry about the feelings of those who oppress” (2020, 228).

Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud (2009), in their response to Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy L. Griffin, and T. M. Linda Sholz’s (2008) essay “Beyond Traditional Conceptions of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility,” write that while “civil discourse provides an ethically desirable stance,” they push for equality as the “necessary prerequisite (not outcome) for a productive invitational, civil discourse” (225). They close their essay by writing that “the cause of justice may not need a theory of invitation but rather a theory of the uncivil tongue” (226).

Stacy Sowards (2020) notes that many “use politeness and civility to engage in unjust and unequal social and material circumstances, and have learned to do so through our families, educational and religious institutions, and social structures” (399). This leads her to wonder, “How do we move past this survival mode of politeness” and “how do we unlearn politeness and civility?” Further, she

asks, "How do we call people out for injustice while maintaining relationships with those same people and supporting our own mental health?" (399).

When I think about civility, I too ask similar questions. I mean, if civility is off the table, if there are no notions of civil dialogue and discussions, how do we talk to each other? How should politicians and other leaders speak to the masses of people? How should we seek understanding from the other? So, is there a way out of this?

Well, maybe, but then my pessimism kicks in, and I say probably not. However, if we venture to try, I submit that a place for us to turn, especially as religious communication scholars, is the Africana communication paradigm. The paradigm, from its inception, has been concerned with "building community, reaffirming human dignity, and enhancing the life of the people," and in later reiterations has been expanded to include "political, economic, and cultural senses as a rhetoric of resistance" (Karenga 2003).

Maulana Karenga suggests that African rhetoric has four overarching ethical concerns: "the dignity and rights of the human person, the well-being of family and community, the integrity and value of the environment, and the reciprocal solidarity and cooperation for mutual benefit of humanity" (2003, 14).² The Africana communication paradigm is a spiritual one focused on balance and harmony for the person as well as for the society.

Again, I know that as a field, we have addressed this tension between civility and the lack thereof thoroughly. There have been calls for us, especially in these days and times, to be more civil to one another, to be open and listen to each other. Some have romanticized the era in which there was a high level of bipartisanship grounded in the civil ways in which political adversaries could talk to one another. However, much of this grounds itself in a Western understanding of communication and rhetoric. For instance, our understanding of ethics, morality, good judgment, civility, and the like springs from our readings of Aristotle, Plato, and others in the classical Western tradition of our field. Only recently has there been an effort to draw from non-Western, non-European writings and scholarship.

But in this particular address, I want to focus on the Africana communication paradigm. I suggest this as a starting point because it is the Africana tradition that grounds itself in a spiritual conception of communication. In short, its very foundation is spiritual, and it is amazing that we have not turned to this tradition to theorize our concepts. While I do not have time to address the entirety of the Africana paradigm, I do want to bring our attention to the concept of Maat. While not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, it provides, I argue, a starting point for us to engage in discussions big and small that we need to have to achieve a better understanding of each other.

² By the way, for a good example of how these ethical concerns are brought together in rhetorical criticism, see Damariye Smith's essay "Kemetic Principles in African American Public Address: An Interrogation of the Rhetoric of Joseph C. Price and the Kemetic Tradition," published in the *Journal of Black Studies*.

Africana Communication: Maat

Molefi Asante (2018) starts his essay “The Classical African Concept of Maat and Human Communication” by acknowledging the crisis in our field: “There is a crisis in the field of communication, but it is brought on by a moral crisis deeply rooted in much of the Western world’s devotion to an ideology of domination” (11). His answer to this crisis is for us to turn to an Africana understanding of Maat. He writes, “African communication in its Maatic dimension may be an answer to the critical issues confronting African and Western culture at this moment of political chaos and uncertainty around what is real and what is unreal” (Asante 2018, 14). For Asante, Maat “is [concerned] about the promotion of sanity, order, balance, harmony, peace, and justice among human beings” (2011, 50). Further, he writes, “What we observe with the practice of Maat is the inevitability of good overcoming evil, of harmony replacing disharmony, and order taking the place of disorder” (Asante 2011, 52).

Carol Lipson argues that the whole of Egyptian rhetoric is “built upon the central concept of Maat” (2004, 79). She translates Maat as “what is right,” drawing from the work of Jan Assmann who described Maat as “connective justice” that directs how people should interact to create communities (Lipson 2004, 79). Edward Karshner suggests that “Maat [is] the universal idea of order, justice, or truth. More fundamentally, Maat was the onto-cosmological principle that connected the divine order of the cosmos with the social order of justice and the ethical reality of human beings” (2011, 58). For Karshner, “What is perceived and spoken must reflect what is true. Just as word is a manifestation of mind, justice or truth is a product of them both. Their power is found in the articulate expression of concepts. When heart and tongue are in agreement, all faculties are ‘made and all qualities determined’” (2011, 59).

Maat then, Karshner writes,

becomes an organizing principle a speaker follows in order to structure both the investigation of phenomena and the expression of the particular knowledge he or she arrives at. . . . Language not only expresses Maat, but stresses that the most powerful speech is that which comes nearer to approximating the reality of Maat. One knows Maat by doing and speaking Maat. Conversely, it is Maat that an audience or reader will respond to in communication. Maat, then, is the preferred method of rhetorical arrangement. (2011, 66)

Maat is more than justice or harmony. Maat is a system of principles that connects to the people in a deep and profoundly spiritual way. Maat helps give people a sense of “divine order, balance, symmetry, geometry, truth, and immortality” (Alkebulan 2004, 25). This only makes sense when one understands that in a traditional African cosmology, there is no separation between the sacred and secular. Maulana Karenga, the foremost scholar of the Maatian ideal, writes that “Maat is a polysemic word, but in the simplest terms it means ‘rightness in the world,’ that is in the divine, natural, and social realms. It is informed by seven cardinal virtues: truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and

order" (2003, 11). For the balance of my time today, I would like to focus on the first virtue, truth.

Asante writes that "truth as a trait of Maat is that which is in synchrony with reality or fact" (2018, 20). He continues, stating that "using this concept of truth, alongside the idea of humans exhibiting the quality of rationality, means that the communicator can demonstrate a logical front for any argument, persuasive communication or informative presentation" (Asante 2018, 20). This means not only that the person speaking must ground themselves in what is true, but also that the person who does not cannot make a good speech. Asante puts it like this: "If you are not a good person then you cannot be a good communicator" (2018, 20). A Maatian understanding of communication calls on us to "distinguish between ideas of eloquence and effectiveness" (2018, 20). In short, even if someone is eloquent, if that eloquence is not grounded in truth, we cannot label that speech a "good speech."

So, the ethical dilemma for our time is this: How do we communicate with people who are not telling the truth? How do we form community with people who are living and perpetuating a lie? What do civility, morality, and justice look like amid incivility, immorality, and injustice? How are harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order maintained amid disharmony, imbalance, and disorder? Again, maybe the Maatian conception of communication and its insistence on truth as a starting point is a place for us to turn.

Case Study: Congress

But just how would a Maatian response look, for instance, when discussing the January 6, 2021, insurrection? Well, understanding that the insurrection was a bad look, Republicans had to reinterpret the event. This started soon after the insurrection, when Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson told an interviewer that he was not afraid at all on January 6 because he "knew" that "those people" were those who "love this country, that truly respect law enforcement, would never do anything to break the law" (Wang 2021).

Earlier, Johnson, in an interview, was quoted as saying, "This didn't seem like an armed insurrection to me." And, "When you hear the word 'armed,' don't you think of firearms? Here's the questions I would have liked to ask: How many firearms were confiscated? How many shots were fired? If that was a planned armed insurrection, man, you had really a bunch of idiots" (Wang, 2021). In another interview he said, "To call that an armed insurrection, it was the most pitiful armed insurrection anyone could possibly imagine." "An armed insurrection? No," he said on WTAQ. "This was a breach" (Elfrink 2021).

During congressional hearings, GOP representatives continued to operate in denial. Rep. Ralph Norman of South Carolina questioned if the rioters involved were actual Trump supporters, despite, as the *New York Times* reported, "their Trump shirts, hats and flags, 'Make America Great Again' paraphernalia, and pro-Trump chants and social media posts" (Broadwater 2021). Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia described that scene as appearing like a "normal tourist visit" to the

Capitol. "Let's be honest with the American people: It was not an insurrection," Clyde proclaimed. "There was an undisciplined mob. There were some rioters, and some who committed acts of vandalism" (Shammas 2021).

So, what does one do when you are up against someone who is not operating in good faith? Traditionally, we have told our students to find the "available means of persuasion," "do not offend," "do not run people away from the table." We traditionally, as I mentioned earlier, ground our responses in civil discourse and dialogue. We place a high value on listening as well so that we can open ourselves to persuasion. However, is there a way to be civil without losing one's dignity? Is there a way to speak and not feel disempowered? I believe if we would adopt a Maatian framework, some of these questions could be answered.

What would a Maatian concept look while addressing this? Well, first, a Maatian conception will speak truth about and to this situation; in this truth, there will be no use of innuendo, soft pedaling, because one does not feel the fragility. You would simply say, "What you are saying is false, a lie, and since it is, I understand now that you do not want to engage in an open manner." The ethical response is to be truthful and stand in that truth.

Furthermore, a Maatian understanding would even address how someone could work in a bipartisan way with a person who traffics in lies and falsities. The expectation to do so is suspect at best. For instance, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during the House deliberations on January 6 that "[a] denial of finding the truth is what we have to deal with. We have to find the truth, and we are hoping to do so in the most bipartisan way possible" (Broadwater 2021). One practicing a Maatian ethic would ask, "How can you find truth from people who are in denial and demonstrably not truthful?" When one stands on a false idea or notion of the truth of what we have collectively witnessed, there is no middle ground, there is no consensus to have, there is no way to come to bipartisan agreement. Traditional rhetorical theory and religious communication become limited in their responses, but a Maatian ethic would at least ask this question: "How would you want me to work with this person or these people?" How would you want me to serve as if nothing has happened?

Second, a Maatian ethic always leaves the option open just to walk away. Again, staying at the table and working out differences is important; it is only important, however, insofar as the parties engaged are doing it in good faith. A Maatian ethic, grounded in the spirituality of discernment, leaves open the option to leave and not to engage in toxic or spiritually damaging behavior. Paraphrasing communication scholar Jack L. Daniel (1970), there are some people you are not going to persuade, no matter how much you practice and how good you are rhetorically. Or better yet, echoing the first-century Galilean prophet who had no place to lay his head, "if they don't receive you, shake the dust off your feet and move on!"

It is here Maatian ethics flips the script on civility. No longer do we have to endure lies and falsities, but to be civil is to tell the truth. To be civil is to speak to the issues and problems that plague this nation. To be civil is to reject those who are not operating in good faith. To be civil is to have the power to leave the situation when it becomes toxic to your health and spirit. To be civil is to engage

truthfully and honestly about issues you are addressing. To be civil is to apologize when you have made an error or mistake and to take the repercussions that come from that mistake. To be civil is to question motives not by what's in a person's heart, but by what they have said and the actions that they have taken. To be civil is to seek out shalom, by grounding yourself in the seeking of the truth, because it is the truth that truly sets us free.

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, I am in the early stages of unpacking the whole of the Africana communication paradigm. But, before I end, I would be remiss if I did not share that Maat in ancient Egypt is personified as female. According to Muata Ashby (n.d.), "She is the divinity who manages the order of Creation. She is the fulcrum upon which the entire Creation and the Law of Cause and Effect or Karma, functions. Maat represents the very order which constitutes creation." In short, Maat brings stability to chaos. She was there at the beginning, and so when order becomes out of balance, or chaotic, maybe an Africana communication model grounded in Maat is what we need to not necessarily bring back but to establish a solid foundation that we can all build.

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